

Right or obligation?

Social Citizenship and 'Workfare' in Hungary

Introduction

The move towards active labour market policies means a fundamental change in both the meaning of social citizenship and the administration in social welfare. Social benefits functioning as rights and being derived from citizenship have become conditional in the new regime and they depend on fulfilling obligations. Social citizenship does not come from status any more but it has become a contract (Handler, 2003). As welfare states transform into workfare states, the constitutive relations and subsequent identities that characterize unemployment are also interpreted in a new way. The notion of unemployment does not only include its normative or moral understanding but also the individuals' responsibility for their own welfare. The social and economic risks of unemployment have to be taken by the individual and the case manager instead of the state bureaucracy (McDonald, Marston 2005).

However, on the contrary to their original aims, the workfare policies often inevitably entail the exclusion of those who cannot meet the required rules or do not comply with them from any reason (Handler 2003). The highly devalued social identity of the unemployed makes it difficult to form a relationship based on mutual respect. Richard Senett believes the loss of respect is the consequence of American workfare policies, which was brought about by making the subjects of the welfare policies infantile and treating them as non-citizens (quoted by McDonald and Marston 2005). The integration policies failed, according to Robert Castel, in case of a significant number of the affected people as regards to the main aim, namely to lead the clients to inclusion. For the majority, integration is not a phase in life but a state in an intermediate social order, which creates a new status, the status of the 'permanently integrating man' (Castel, 1998).

This paper undertakes to describe the intentional and non-intentional exclusionary effects of the Hungarian social policy practice ("Ways to Work" Program) that aims at the social integration of the active-aged unemployed people partaking regular social allowances, starting out from the theoretical supposition that says social policy is also a setting of the fights for the practical interpretation of the citizens' eligibilities. Accordingly, the state, following its role, has a twofold function in determining the content and volume of the social rights: on the one hand it actively defines them; on the other it creates a legal frame for the social norms regarding the range of the generally accepted needs and their minimal amounts (Szalai 2007). After clarifying the framework of the concepts, first the manifest, institutional level legal restrictions will be dealt with. The second part of the paper will present the symbolic forms of exclusion, searching for the answer to the question: How does the public discussion about the welfare recipients relate to full citizenship of these people?

Theoretical framework

The most obvious starting point to assess the features of full membership in a society is T. H. Marshall's concept of citizenship, according to which certain elements of the citizenship rights – civil, political and social rights – were not separated before the 18th century, but they developed completely diversely as a result of their functional differentiation, and their growth occurred in different centuries. In the 19th century social rights were still not attached to citizenship status, and the people on relief belonged not to the community of citizens but to the “company of miserable outcasts”. Social rights became recognized as basic citizen's rights only from the second half of the 20th century with the extension of the services of the welfare state, making the full social participation of the working class possible (Marshall 1991/1965).

However, beside the above mentioned macro level of social integration there is a community¹ level as well which – as Durkheim put it – requires inherence to a primary solidary community that is an indispensable mediator between the private individual and the life in the society (quoted by Gorz 1999). For the operationalization of the concept of full citizenship, Peter Townsend's (1991) classic personality theory seems to be necessary to be mentioned, too, according to which one criterion of social integration is that the individuals, families and some groups of the population should have enough resources to feed, to participate in activities and to access life conditions and goods that are normal in the given society or at least accepted and approved by many.

Finally, full membership in a society includes a citizenship concept, as well, in a cultural sense, based on the recognition and respect of special, defined group rights. The question can be raised: what group identity features and group rights might exist in the case of benefit recipients compared to ethnic minorities and lesbians? How can the concept of cultural citizenship be extended to a group that does not have a common identity? Nancy Fraser believes recognition should be dealt with as an issue connected to social status. From this perspective, the denial of recognition does not mean the distortion or devaluation of group identity but subordination in a sense that one is hindered in their full rights citizenship (Fraser 2003). Further arguments for the usefulness of the concept of cultural citizenship include on the one hand that in sociology the deprived groups are increasingly identified by cultural and milieu features (e. g. single mother raising children, the disabled, people living in small towns, ethnic Roma, etc.), and on the other that the most concrete common denominator of a group of varied backgrounds is segregation from the middle class by representation (Hammer 2006).

¹ The differentiation of the two forms of social integration appears in Habermas's works (*System und Lebenswelt*) in the most elaborate way but Tönnies's society and community concept refers to this as well.

The appearance of the principle of workfare in the aid of active-aged people in Hungary

The practical implication of the principle “work for aid” first emerged in Hungary in 1997, as one of the conditions of the utilization of regular social benefit² introduced in the Social Act. The idea behind the regulation was that support by itself cannot solve the problems of the permanently unemployed; they need helping services and active social and employment policy tools which facilitate their social integration. This makes it necessary for the recipient to cooperate with a social agency appointed by the local government and thus be involved in public employment. As the guidelines of the Act attached the rule of obligation of cooperation to the presence of adequate institutional and professional conditions, the majority of local governments did not create the framework of public employment.

However, as from May 2000 the income replacement benefit for permanently unemployed people was replaced by the somewhat lower amount of regular social benefit which was subject to conditions. The most important part of the change in 2000 was that only those could receive the support who accepts the possibility of public work offered to them. Henceforward the obligation of cooperation for the recipients was not a function of local government regulations but it became a legal requirement. In the following years the limit of the extension of obligatory employment of the unemployed was not the willingness of the recipients but the amount of resources for employment and the labour organizing and offering capacity of the local governments (Csoba 2010).

A significant change in 2005 was that all local governments were made to prepare “inclusion programs” to help the integration of the permanently unemployed. The tasks of the designated institutions for cooperation – mainly family care centres – included the preparation of programs to enhance reintegration, which covered the rules of keeping contact and accepting offered jobs, and the details of possible participation in educational or skills development programs. This new regulation required more activities and responsibility on the clients’ part than earlier. According to the results of a research in 2007, in spite of the fact that the designated institutions had no or very limited personal and material resources for the organization and arrangement of the reintegration programs, this can be seen as the most modern approach to the inclusion of the unemployed (Csoba 2007).

The working conditions of the integration program had not even been realized when in 2006 the support system was transformed again and the individual support was replaced by a family type social aid system. “This was the first attempt in Hungary to institutionalize the social minimum” (Ferge 2008) but it caused such tensions on local levels that the mayors of settlements in disadvantaged regions initiated to change the law and cut back on the “generous” support system and start the “Ways to Work” program.

² Regular social support is a benefit received by active aged people in disadvantaged labor market state (health impaired, not employed).

“Ways to Work”: from inclusion to work test

The action pack that aimed at improving the ability of the unemployed and inciting them to find jobs was published in the spring of 2008 and the Hungarian Parliament already passed the acts at the end of that year. The basic concept of the “Ways to Work” program was from the beginning that the allowances which are financed with public money should be made subject to conditions, and only those should be supported who do something for themselves. Some local governments tried to put into practice the joining of social aid with work “done for the public” before the program was published.

Focusing on the social citizenship of the strata excluded from the job market I review only the changes in the aid of the active aged unemployed people; of which one of the most important being the differentiation of the support system, the sorting of the eligible recipients by their work abilities and “worthiness”: According to the amendments of the act, only those exempted from work can receive regular social support by citizen’s right. These people may include those over 55, the health impaired, or those who raise children under 14 as single parent and the children’s daytime care is not available in their town. Thus the categories worthiness / unworthiness can be legally regulated locally, increasing the discretionary authority of local governments in deciding how to categorize the people in need.

Participation in the integration program – earlier obligatory for all recipients – is mandatory in the new program only for the group “exempted from work”. This also means that the majority of the recipients are given almost no social or employment services. People above 55 who constitute the majority of social aid recipients were declared unwanted in public employment market; however a lot of them would like to get back to the primary job market too. In their case, the aim of the integration programs was primarily to enhance their life quality but the helpers can hardly find feasible aims in reality which could make tangible changes in the life of the clients who would actually like to work.

Those people who are in the category of being able to work are entitled to ‘on-call support’ but only if they cannot participate in public work involuntarily (the local government cannot offer them such jobs). For those who are under 35 and have not completed primary school, the support is given only if they undertake to participate in training aimed at completing primary school or obtaining competencies necessary to start vocational training.

“Employment policy” of the local governments

According to surveys on the efficiency of public employment programs in Hungary, one third of the employed go to and fro between the active and the passive support systems. Gábor Kertesi (2005) writes that the other reason welfare employment is dysfunctional is that these short term, publicly heavily subsidized jobs conserve the dependence on aid, reinforce vulnerability to authorities, and the recipients are forced to do degrading jobs marked with negative social stereotyping. Regarding the employment characteristics and effects of the new program, it basically differs from the earlier public employment programs only in the longer time scale of the employment and the greater number of recipients. The organization of public employment is still the duty of the local authorities; as for public service work, a fixed-termed employment has to be established for at least 90 working days per year and at least six hours of daily work

The findings of the impact test following the introduction of “Ways to Work” program have shown that in most towns they find it difficult to comply with the law since there are not enough tasks in the towns that can be carried out with public work, and the tasks themselves need experts and devices which far exceed the possibilities of public work. The suddenly increased number of workforce brought about a range of technical and organizational problems. Local governments do not have enough resources for buying devices and developing infrastructure and in many places even toiletries, changing clothes and toilet use cause problems. At the same time, the ideology and financing of the program (unlimited source) encourage the local governments to carry on with the program even if it works with very low efficiency. In total, it can be stated that the local tensions existing before the cut backs on the support system have not eased in the towns. The idling public workers without jobs strike local people who often complain about them and bring it up with local officials and many times the staff of the local authority complain about them, too. (Vida-Virág 2010)

Analyzing the parliamentary debate³ of the “Ways to Work” Program

I have chosen an interpretation framework as a guiding thread for the qualitative content analyses, which understands political discourse as a special reality construction and policy documents as the mediators of normative paradigms instead of objective description of social problems (Sevenhuijsen 2002). In the analyses summarizing the lessons of the parliamentary debate, I mainly attempt to identify and assess the normative framework of the bill (problem definition, leading values and ideologies, conceptions on human nature).

³ Source: http://www.parlament.hu/internet/plsql/ogy_naplo.naplo_fadat_aktus?p_ckl
Sitting 179, 181,182,184, 186 (19. 11. 2008 – 15. 12. 2008)

Definition of the problem

In most cases these definitions do not approach social problems in an objective way, without judgments but they contain several normative presuppositions. The general rationale of the bill says that the demand for low skilled jobs has decreased dramatically during the past decade so the unskilled workers of active age increasingly lost ground in the job market. The number of permanently unemployed people is high and among them the recipients of regular social aid is gaining higher proportion. A further problem is that the group of young adults with no or little education is rising year by year, who are highly possible to live on aid and other social transfers during their active decades.

The majority of the speakers in the parliamentary debate thought of the low employment rate and the increase of the permanently unemployed not as a primarily economic or social problem but as a tension between the social support system and the “world of work” so they believe the greatest problem is that the amount of the aid – together with informal and illegal work- exceeds the minimal wage. It is a sign of sensationalism gaining space in politics that the referred “data” on the amount of social aid come from reports from the media and calculations published on the Internet. Different parties also agree totally on that the relatively high amount of aid is the reason of the increase in unemployment and in the passing on of “recipient life style” from generation to generation, so only those poor people who are unable to work should enjoy the financial form of social solidarity. The only difference between the arguments of the members of the governing parties submitting the bill and those of the conservative opposition is that the latter would require complying with some “community” requirements to pay the allowance and they would stress some elements of sanctioning and controlling.

Leading values

It is also a good starting point to understand the normative paradigms that define different policy programs if we explore the value based arguments in the text and the relationship of these values and their role in the whole of the document. In the “Ways to Work” program, the traditional social democratic values – solidarity, social justice – appear rather redefined in a statist and a paternalist guise. The basic principles that define the EU policies and national development plans, such as equal opportunities and social inclusion rarely appear in the parliamentary debate. The truly traditionally accepted social democratic values, such as solidarity appear in a special interpretation as “solidarity on the principle of needs”, which concept contains the conditionality of the normative supports and the principle of reciprocity. Also, the meaning of social justice differs greatly from distribution justice that is usually referred to in social policy. The participants in the debate understand it as “meeting the sense of justice of honest people living from work” or the cutting back on social support system and withdrawing the financial support from the poor people who can be blamed for their poverty.

Concepts on human nature

When assessing the values we can find the answer to the question: What presuppositions do the speakers in the debate on the program aiming at changing the aid system have on human nature and how do these beliefs fit into the concepts of social citizenship? The acknowledgment of individual freedom rights (negative freedom) as a value and the respect of human autonomy appeared only in the arguments of the members of the liberal party. The most often mentioned values referring to human nature were connected to individual responsibility, reputable work and lifestyle.

It is not difficult to recognize the features of coded racism behind the comparison between the reputable families living on their work and the families settling in social support. Among the latent anti-gypsy statements hidden behind the label of local social tensions there appears the gender specific version of bad attitude to work, namely the concern about giving birth for the benefits. It is probable that this is why the notion of exempting parents of three or more children from public work in the original version of the bill did not pass in the final one.

Assessing the normative framework of the program

The measures to “improve the social support system” do not intent to decrease the dysfunctions of the institution system but to curb eligibilities to benefits and to filter those who are “undeserving”. The often mentioned “incitement to work” is a euphemism for obliging to work because rejecting the offered public service employment is followed by exclusion from receiving aid. Thus the practical realization of the “activating principle” based on individual responsibility becomes the strategy of deprivation from responsibility, and responsibility will become the same as duty. This way, the aim of the compulsory participation in public employment programs is not to raise the level of employment but to change individual attitudes and to educate recipients and their families to work.

Also, one of the openly unspoken aims of the bill is to keep the number of people living on benefits at the same level and to decrease the tensions – mainly the anti-Gypsy feelings - at local levels. The majority of the parliament would definitely bond full social citizenship to legal employment, to complying with the rules of social cohabitation and to a lifestyle adequate to community requirements. So the guarantees of sustaining existence have ceased to exist in case of the active aged unemployed and even the most disadvantaged unemployed people’s aid have become provisional. Thus unemployment and the poverty that goes with it has become the individuals’ responsibility almost completely, so the “society” provides care as civil rights only for those who are unable to work.

Summary

Dahrendorf points out that once rights cease to be unconditional, an avenue may open to rules that prescribe people what to do. So citizens' duties must pertain to everyone and they must be public (quoted by Handler 2003). Castel (2005) believes the groups that are torn out of the protection of work can be included in the idea that they should not be looked upon as people dependent on aid or living on benefits but people of the same rank as us who are temporarily not able to take the opportunity of the privileges of social citizenship given for all so we should seek that they obtain the tools needed to gain them back. But to achieve this, we need to have collectively binding, legally institutionalized guarantees which look upon the people who ask for help – disregarding their personal traits – as entitled to not as dependent on something. Here and now it would seem Utopian to introduce the guaranteed social minimum, and we should be satisfied if they did not wish to foster the employability of the most disadvantaged strata with the separation of the deserving and undeserving poor.

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